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'ZOMIA': NEW CONSTRUCTIONS  
OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN HIGHLANDS  
AND THEIR TIBETAN IMPLICATIONS

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While I have never had the opportunity to meet Kevin Stuart in person, I have been aware for many years of the major contribution he has made to Tibetan studies, both through his own writings and through his encouragement of the development of local scholarship among Tibetans and other peoples living within the People's Republic of China. Kevin's work as scholar and collaborator, and the generosity of spirit which underlies it and which I have witnessed in my own correspondence with him, has set up a new and very significant model for work in the area, and I am happy to have the opportunity to offer him my congratulations and my thanks on the occasion of this commemorative volume. Kevin's own work is notable for its groundedness in small-scale social life and its closeness to its ethnographic subject. The work of the two authors I discuss here, particularly that of James C Scott, is in many ways quite contrasting, dealing in large-scale theorising and generalisations. Yet the work of both Scott and Willem van Schendel, like that of Kevin, is rooted in a concern for the people whose lives are the subject of our work, and I hope that he will find some enjoyment and value in this reflection on the relevance of 'Zomia' to the study of Tibetan societies.

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<sup>1</sup> The first version of this paper was presented at the August 2010 conference of the International Association of Tibetan Studies in Vancouver. Revised versions were presented at La Trobe University in Melbourne on 14 Sept 2010, the University of Sydney on 7 Oct 2010, the Buddhist Forum, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London on 19 November 2010, and the University of Toronto on 22 March 2013. I thank the audiences on all these occasions for their helpful and constructive comments.

## ZOMIA ACCORDING TO WILLEM VAN SCHENDEL

The concept of 'Zomia' was first advanced in a paper published in 2002 by the Dutch scholar Willem van Schendel (van Schendel 2002). Van Schendel's early work concerned the hill peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tract in Eastern Bangladesh (e.g. van Schendel 1992). In his 2002 paper, he pointed to the arbitrariness of the divisions we make between regions of Asia – South, Southeast, East, Central – for purposes of area studies.<sup>2</sup> This, I might add, is already a major issue for Tibet, the region within which my own work has mostly been situated. The study of Tibetan societies, for historical and political reasons, has found itself on the margins between these divisions, and without a really comfortable home in any of them. A map in van Schendel's article (van Schendel 2002: 652, Fig.1) allocates it to 'Central Asia,' but Central Asia for area studies purposes usually tends to mean Muslim Central Asia plus the Mongols.

In fact, Figure 1 in van Schendel's article is not concerned with allocating Tibet to Central Asia – quite the opposite. Its real point relates to four dots close to the putative intersection between South, Southeast, East and Central Asia. These four dots represent:

...four settlements in the eastern Himalayas, each some 50 km from the other. Arbitrary decisions made in far-off studies and conference rooms have allocated them to four different world areas: Gohaling is in Yunnan ('East Asia'), Sakongdan in Burma ('Southeast Asia'), Dong is in India ('South Asia'), and Zayü is in Tibet ('Central Asia'). [...] The assumption that the more meaningful links of these places are with faraway 'area cores' rather than with each other is rather preposterous, and the claim of area studies to be mindful of the unity of people's 'shared ideas, related lifeways, and long-standing cultural ties' comes a cropper here (van Schendel 2002:653).

Van Schendel's point is well taken. To the extent that these area studies divisions have any social or cultural logic, it is because of

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<sup>2</sup> As van Schendel notes, 'Central Asia' came well after the others, emerging only in the 1990s (van Schendel 2002: 648 and n.2).

features each area (South, Southeast, East, Central Asia) is supposed to hold in common.<sup>3</sup> But, as van Schendel implies here, even if one could plausibly define the major part of each of these areas in relation to these core characteristics, such definitions are likely to have little meaning when one is dealing with places on the peripheries. Yet these are not just marginal places; they have their own integrity and logic, based on connections that cut across these arbitrary borders.

Of course these connections had not gone unnoticed by previous scholars. There is an established tradition of Southeast Asian highlands studies, going back at least to Edmund Leach's classic volume from the early 1950s, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Leach 1954; see Samuel 1994 for further references). Van Schendel, however, both made the point very explicitly, at a time when discussions of alternative geographies and languages of flows across borders were already gaining considerable currency, and also provided a tentative new name to refer to the highland region as a whole. This name was 'Zomia', based on *zomi*, a term for highlanders in several languages of the region. In relation to how to go forward theoretically, van Schendel suggested an emphasis on borderlands, and an attention to flows of objects, peoples and ideas across borders, as a way of moving towards more appropriate geographies than those allowed by the area studies paradigms. The astute reader will sense the shadow of Arjun Appadurai in the background here (e.g. Appadurai 1999), and indeed van Schendel refers to Appadurai in his article (van Schendel 2002:658, 659).

It is worth spelling out that there are two distinct aspects to van Schendel's argument. There is the general point that academic divisions between areas and cultural regions tend to privilege the central zones as against the margins. This deflects attention away

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<sup>3</sup> The dominant classical languages of South and East Asia, Sanskrit and Chinese, are obvious candidates, and of course significant in terms of the organization of scholarship, since expertise in South Asian or East Asian studies tends to be defined in large part in terms of expertise in the corresponding languages and literatures, or in modern languages and literatures with a close historical if not necessarily genetic relationship to them.

from the places near the edges, making it difficult to appreciate the margins, which are not really margins except as a result of the arbitrary divisions which have made them so, in their own terms. But van Schendel clearly also wanted to remind us more specifically that the various peripheral areas that fall into highland Southeast Asia, his own personal area of expertise, can usefully be looked at within a common frame of analysis. Much of the same is true of James C Scott, to whom I will turn in a little while: there is both a general message and a specific regional concern.

This dual aim led to a certain amount of confusion in the developing literature on Zomia. Some people became very interested in the precise limits of Zomia, and with whether or not particular areas should be considered as part of Zomia or not. Yet my own feeling is that neither van Schendel nor Scott were really concerned with precisely delimiting a region called 'Zomia' which had a strongly shared cultural identity and integrity of its own. In van Schendel's case, this would hardly go along with the other side of his argument, which suggested that viewing the world in terms of such distinct and separate areas was actually part of the problem.

Thus, van Schendel's rather sketchy map of Zomia in his original article (van Schendel 2002:653, Fig.2) delimits an area of highland peasant peoples whose primary common feature is a relative remoteness from the major states of the region. The societies in question share little else, beyond perhaps a tendency to small-scale, relatively unstable states, and a strong sense of local autonomy. Certainly, we are not dealing with an area that has a great deal of cultural homogeneity. According to Jean Michaud (2010:188 and Figure 1), van Schendel subsequently revised his concept of Zomia to include a number of areas further to the west, including parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Michaud calls this expanded Zomia 'Zomia+', and this 'Zomia+' is even more culturally varied than the original Zomia. Indeed, van Schendel does not appear very interested in arguing for Zomia as a cultural area across which there is a great deal of commonality. Zomia for him functions mainly as a stalking-horse to attack the idea of area studies.

Scott's argument is a little different, since his Zomia has more analytic content than van Schendel's. However, Scott's Zomia is arguably a state of mind and a mode of behaving that is not restricted to the people living in any precisely-delimited area of the world, so it may again be that the question of whether a particular place is in Zomia or not misses the point. At most, we might ask whether Zomian behaviour or Zomian thinking is an important part of how that place operates.

I make this initial point in part because the various maps presented by van Schendel and Scott disagree about whether Tibetan societies actually fall within 'Zomia'. However, the map of Zomia in van Schendel's original article clearly includes most of the Tibetan plateau along with highland Nepal (van Schendel 2002:653, Fig.2). Western Tibet and Ladakh are excluded, but probably more by accident than design. Both areas are included within Michaud's 'Zomia+', along with areas further to the West such as Baltistan, Hunza, and Swat (Michaud 2010:188, Fig.1).

## ZOMIA ACCORDING TO JAMES C SCOTT

The other major figure with whom this article is concerned, James C Scott, delimits Zomia quite differently. Scott's initial scholarly focus was on Vietnam and Malaysia, and he is best known for an important series of studies which focus in various ways on state power and on peasant resistance to it – *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (Scott 1976); *Weapons of the Weak* (1985); *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), and *Seeing Like a State* (1998). Scott's 'Zomia' book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, appeared in 2009, though the ideas had been prefigured in a series of lectures Scott gave from around 2007

onwards, which received considerable public attention in their own right.<sup>4</sup>

Scott's book, like van Schendel's article, includes a map of Zomia, but it is considerably more restricted than either of van Schendel's (Scott 2009:17, Map 2). From the perspective of Tibetan studies, it is worth noting that Tibet and the Himalayas from Bhutan westward are not included in Scott's Zomia.<sup>5</sup> Scott does include, however, some areas that van Schendel omits: his Zomia contains substantially more of Southeast China, and some additional territory along the frontier between Thailand and Burma.

So we have at least three versions of Zomia and its boundaries: van Schendel's original version, his extended version, and Scott's version.<sup>6</sup> I think, however, that as noted above we can get rather too tangled in the question of where Zomia stops and starts. For Scott, as for van Schendel, the central issue is arguably not 'Zomia' as a delimited unit. Scott's primary concern is with the processes of state formation and political power, and the counter-processes by which people attempt to escape from the destructive impact of that power. It is these processes that he sees as generating the characteristic features of such places as Zomia. Yet there is again a kind of double focus here, and much of the literature commenting on Scott has been more interested in the particularities of Southeast Asia than on Scott's general theoretical approach.

Scott's book is, nevertheless, only secondarily concerned with delimiting a new region for area studies. Its main thrust is to propose a major shift in how we understand the history, society, and culture *both* of regions such as the Southeast Asian Highlands, and to a

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. his Frank H. Golay Memorial Lecture at Cornell in May 2009, which is available on video on the web at <http://www.cornell.edu/video/?videoID=625>, accessed 8 December 2014.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, neither are the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the adjoining Indian highland state of Tripura, which seems a little odd given van Schendel's regional interests.

<sup>6</sup> To which we could add a fourth and considerably smaller Zomia, the area that is associated with the ethnonym zo according to F.K. Lehman. Hjorleifur Jonsson refers to this as Zomia<sup>o</sup> (Jonsson 2010:195).

considerable degree *also* of the large-scale states that impinged on them. Scott's book has been widely read and discussed, so here I shall just summarise his principal arguments in point form:

1. The 'Zomia' region until recent times was one of the last of a series of 'escape zones' to which people moved to avoid incorporation into states. These regions were characterized by their relative difficulty of access for centres of state powers. This meant that it was impractical and uneconomic to include them in pre-modern state projects on a continuing basis. Being in an 'escape zone' did not guarantee total protection. These regions were accessible to intermittent campaigns and raiding, and often had to accept some degree of tributary relationship with surrounding states.<sup>7</sup> However, on the whole the people in these regions were left alone.
2. The people who lived in these areas were not necessarily relics or survivals of earlier indigenous populations. Many of them were descendants of escapees from surrounding states (e.g. Han Chinese, Burmese, or Thai in the case of Zomia) who moved to these areas and adopted local social and cultural practices. In other words, a significant part of the population of Zomia and similar areas consisted of people who had *chosen* not to be part of a state. If one can sense Appadurai's

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<sup>7</sup> Some commentators on Scott's work appear to assume that any relationship by a 'Zomian' group with neighbouring centres of power in some sense disproves his model. Despite his tendency to stress the 'escape' aspects of Zomian existence, I do not think that he implies that there is no relationship with surrounding states. In fact, he discusses such relationships at some length. The issue may be more (Shneiderman, below) to do with the kind of recognition by the state. Here it is worth noting that (as with the Chinese *tusi*) the state's official representations could diverge considerably from reality on the ground. Thus the Imperial Chinese state officially regarded all relationships with external powers, including Japan, England and Portugal, as tributary relationships by subordinate powers, and Imperial protocol was based on this assumption, even at a time when the actual power relationship was very different.

work in the background to van Schendel's, the spirit that hovers over Scott's work is that of the late Pierre Clastres, whose *La société contre l'état* (*Society against the State*, Clastres 1977) provides the book's epigraph.<sup>8</sup>

3. The peoples who lived in these areas acquired cultural inventories that were appropriate to their primary goal of evading state power. These included forms of agriculture that worked in highland terrain, were compatible with relatively frequent movement, and were not easily raided by state authorities, as well as forms of social organization compatible with frequent movement and the lack of centralized authority.

Historically, these peoples tend to be labeled as 'tribal' by state authorities, and seen as backward and in need of incorporation within the state. It can be seen that Scott is presenting a very different picture. For him, the 'tribe' is something that was developed as a mode of organization to *resist* the state, rather than being a survival of a more primitive social arrangement that has been superseded by the state.

4. Their cultural inventory also included the ability to shift between multiple 'ethnicities', and to represent themselves plausibly in different ways to state authorities to suit the specific circumstances. Thus a particular village might shift between Kachin or Shan (to give Leach's example), or between Tibetan, Chinese, or Monguor (to give a contemporary example from Northeast Tibet) depending on what suited their interests at any given time. Individuals and communities systematically maintained the ability to perform several identities.

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<sup>8</sup> The epigraph is at Scott 2009: v. Scott discusses Clastres' influence on his work in an interview published in *Humanity* in Spring 2014 (Gilman and Guilhot 2014: 111).

5. Many of these societies did not have writing, but Scott suggests that this absence was not a mere lack, but also a significant part of their cultural inventory. These people were not pre-literate but post-literate. They had in a sense chosen not to have writing, and often had stories implying that it had been lost at some time in the past. Writing was an instrument of the state and a mechanism of administration. It was safer for them not to have written records. Scott has a nice quote from Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* on this theme:

Writing appears to be necessary for the centralized, stratified state to reproduce itself. Writing is a strange thing ... The one phenomenon which has invariably accompanied it is the formation of cities and empires: the integration into a political system, that is to say, of a considerable number of individuals into a hierarchy of castes and slaves ... It seems rather to favour the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind (cited in Scott 2009:228).

6. Religious forms in these areas also make sense as an adaptation to the specific conditions of escape and refuge from the state. They tend to be non-hierarchical, and to provide the potential for *ad hoc* charismatic leadership at times when rapid change is required. I shall return to this theme later, since it is especially relevant to the Tibetan situation.
7. Finally, the complex ethnic and linguistic maps of regions such as the Southeast Asian Highlands can be understood as 'shatter zones' formed by numerous successive waves of refugees from processes of state formation and state conflict.

Clearly, these points amount to a thorough and radical rethinking of traditional understandings of both the Zomian region and other such regions. Scott suggests that Zomia and other such escape zones have all now effectively been incorporated into nation-states. As we will

see, some scholars have suggested that elements of 'Zomia'-thinking are nevertheless still alive and well in the contemporary period.

## ZOMIA, ITS COMMENTATORS AND ITS MEANINGS

Van Schendel and Scott clearly have interests in common. They are both working within an essentially anthropological frame of reference, and both are interested in the fate of little people, if you like, on the edges of states and empires – but their projects are somewhat different, and also come out of different anthropological traditions – I cited Appadurai and Clastres as shorthand labels in each case. Van Schendel argues that globalization is making area studies boundaries increasingly less relevant, while Scott's book is almost an elegy for people who have managed to escape the state and live on a very local scale. Van Schendel's Zomians have mobile phones, whereas Scott's have deliberately forgotten how to read. Subsequent commentators on Zomia have had their own projects, which may not have much in common with either van Schendel's or Scott's, so there is a certain potential for confusion, or at any rate for people to go off in a variety of different directions.

In the remainder of this article I shall concentrate on Scott's book, which has already stimulated special issues of at least three journals since its appearance, as well as a sizeable flurry of individual articles (e.g. Michaud 2009; Perdue 2009; Jonsson 2010, 2012; Karlsson 2013), and a plethora of review-symposia and individual book reviews.

The three special issues are of the *Journal of Global History* (volume 5, no.2, July 2010), *Review of Austrian Economics* (volume 25, no.1, March 2012) and *Common Knowledge* (volume 18, no.3, Fall 2012). The *Journal of Global History* issue is the first and most substantial of these, with seven articles, including Jean Michaud's extensive introduction (Michaud 2010) and Victor Lieberman's review-article (Lieberman 2010). The remaining contributions, from a mixed group of historians and anthropologists, explore the applicability of Scott's ideas in a variety of historical and

ethnographic contexts. I discuss some of these articles in more detail below. The historians, on the whole, tend to spend a lot of time questioning exactly where Zomia is, whether it really exists, and where its boundaries might be. The anthropologists do a bit of this too. It is natural, if you are an anthropologist, to want to know whether your tribe is in Zomia or not, though as the reader probably appreciates by this stage, much depends on whose map of Zomia you are looking at. On the whole though, the anthropologists are more interested than the historians in Scott's theoretical argument, which picks up, as I have noted, on some significant threads in modern anthropology.

The *Austrian Review of Economics*'s special issue, with six articles, is almost as extensive, and has some intriguing contributions. Some of the economists are interested in whether Zomian behaviour is rational (Rajagopalan and Storr 2012). Others want to know what Zomia has to tell us about the possibilities of evading contemporary states (Stringham and Miles 2012). Stringham and Miles go as far as suggesting that modern multinationals are exhibiting Zomian behaviour in using their access to different national regimes to avoid tax. I'm not sure what Scott would make of this, given his tendency to go for a bottom-up view of society and his evident sympathy for the people who are most likely to lose from the draining of state resources by multinational tax evasion. The multinationals also are not necessarily using deception when they employ multiple citizenship to pursue their ends, although there can be an element of this. Many of the devices they use to evade tax are quite public and well known.

To return to the *Journal of Global History*, we can, as I have suggested, spend too much time worrying about the boundaries of Zomia. How closely any specific area meets the parameters of Scott's description of Zomia, on the basis of detailed historical or ethnographic data, is, however, a reasonable enough question to ask. The usual answer tends to be that, in relation to a detailed enough account of any particular area, Scott's criteria are messy and incomplete, and fit less than perfectly. That is perhaps unsurprising, given that his book is a large, ambitious, generalizing work that

inevitably omits as much as it includes, and oversimplifies complex historical particularities, but which offers a striking and significant new vision. If you approach Scott's work with the assumption that there is a clearly delineated region called Zomia and that his characterization of the social and cultural aspects of Zomian people should apply comprehensively and exhaustively to any specific group that lived within that area, it is not difficult to demonstrate that his account is inadequate.

To approach Scott in this way, however, would be to miss the positive insights provided by his work. The same, I think, is true of other lines of criticism, for all that they are pertinent enough, such as the tendency of the book to reflect current Western concerns and interests at the expense of the people who actually live in 'Zomia' (e.g. Jonsson 2012).<sup>9</sup> What Scott offers us – rather as he did in the *Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) and *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) – is a sense of social history as lived from the bottom up. The validity of the account in any given instance is less relevant than the new perspectives opened up for understanding social behaviour, both historically and in the contemporary situation. All he really needs to do to validate this picture is to demonstrate that enough people in the region behaved in Zomian-like ways to render the account plausible.

Yet I am left with a sense that Zomia can mean quite a few different things, and we shall see more as we continue. It may be useful to have a preliminary listing:

- Zomia can be a region in the Southeast Asian Highlands, perhaps extended through Tibet and the Himalayas and even into Pakistan and Afghanistan, with certain common social and cultural features;

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<sup>9</sup> As Jonsson (2012:167) puts it, "Zomia offers no place for Asian highlanders on whatever have been their own terms, but instead a vast playground for western libertarian distraction and delight." As Jonsson and others have noted, actual 'Zomian' voices are largely absent from Scott's text, a point which Scott himself implicitly admits in his interview for *Humanity* (Gilman and Guilhot 2014:116-117).

- Zomia can refer to a specific zone of refuge from the state in the Southeast Asian highlands in the past, which has now been absorbed into modern states and so has lost its specific features;
- Zomia can be seen as typical of a number of such zones of refuge that have existed at various times throughout the world;
- Zomia can be significant as indicating a mode of analysis that focuses on processes of evasion of state control (in the past and/or in the present).

This last option in turn has a number of possible variants:

- Zomia can indicate a set of cultural practices which assisted particular groups (individuals, families, villages, larger populations) in the past to evade state control
- There may be Zomian modes of thinking and behaving, by which groups of people systematically avoid state control (e.g. the Romanis or Gypsies, a frequent example of Scott's; Scott 2009:235, 261, 330)
- As part of such Zomian modes of thinking and behaving, groups of people may systematically present themselves to state authorities in ways such as to maximize their advantage (particularly in relation to alternative identities)
- For some authors, simple exploitation of multiple citizenship, at whatever level, even on behalf of a multinational company, constitutes 'Zomian behaviour' (Stringham and Miles 2012).

Other variations could probably be added. None of these usages is necessarily illegitimate or inappropriate, but the fact that the term has already attracted such a range of usage can cause confusion, and perhaps suggests that Zomia as a mode of analysis risks being used to explain so much that it can lose its explanatory value altogether.

## ZOMIAN REFLECTIONS ON TIBET AND THE HIMALAYAS

With these cautionary remarks in mind, I move on to look at the applicability of Scott's approach to Tibetan and Himalayan societies. Scott's area focus, as we have seen, does not directly include Tibet and the Himalayas. His mode of analysis could nevertheless provide a significant intervention in an argument which has been evolving for some time about the nature of the Tibetan state – or as I would prefer to put it myself, the nature of pre-modern Tibetan polities, which were actually quite varied. Early accounts of Tibet, perhaps overly impressed by the undoubtedly exotic ideological foundations and equally exotic state ceremonial associated with the Dalai Lama's regime at Lhasa, tended to settle for an over-simple picture of Tibet as a theocracy and the Dalai Lama as God-King. By the 1970s and 1980s, there was enough reasonably solid ethnography from various Tibetan cultural regions, and enough detail about Tibetan political history, to be able to see that things were much more complicated than that, and I attempted to put the picture together as far as I could in a series of chapters in my 1993 book *Civilized Shamans* (Samuel 1993:39-154).

It was already clear by then that the Lhasa regime was quite limited in its power for much of its history, that there were a variety of other competing centres of power, and that substantial segments of the Tibetan population, particularly in the pastoralist areas, were effectively outside any kind of state control. Most of these centres of power were in any case much more interested in extracting a certain amount of tax and *corvée* labour from the populations within their reach than in exercising control over everyday life. Disputes were settled by local mediation both in pastoralist and agriculturalist areas; they were rarely brought to the small number of state administrative officials, and there was no developed body of law, either case-law or statutory (Samuel 1993:121-3, 132-6; Pirie 2005a, 2005b, 2006)

All this suggests that Scott's mode of analysis might have considerable applicability to Tibet. Two of the *Journal of Global History* authors, Pat Giersch and Sara Shneiderman, deal more or

less directly with Tibetan regions, and both suggest some degree of applicability for Scott's model. Thus Shneiderman notes that Scott's mode of analysis raises significant issues for Tibet and the Himalayas:

The analytic imperatives that underlie Scott's usage of [the term Zomia] can be of great utility to those working in the Himalayan region, particularly the emphasis on the ethnic, national, and religious fluidity of highland communities, and their agency vis-à-vis the states with which they engage (Shneiderman 2010: 290).

I would agree. At the same time, there are a number of ways in which Tibetan regions do not fit neatly into the Zomian model. While there is certainly ethnic variety on the edge of ethnic Tibet, as in parts of Amdo, Gyalrong, and the central and eastern Himalayan ranges, it does not rise to the complexity of the central Southeast Asian Highland region, and is for the most part confined to the margins.<sup>10</sup> Much of the Tibetan plateau itself has long had a shared spoken language, if with considerable dialectical variation, and a shared *written* language – there is no sign of rejection of writing here, in fact Tibet is one of the places, globally, where the cult of the written word was most highly developed in pre-modern times.<sup>11</sup>

The Dalai Lama's regime might have been weak as states went, but, as both Shneiderman and Giersch point out, it had centres of state power. Lhasa was certainly one, if a relatively weak one for much of its history. Major monastic and aristocratic political centres elsewhere throughout the region also had considerable permanence, authority and exploitative capacity in relation to peasant populations. Pat Giersch makes this point in his contribution to the same issue in relation to some of the large Khamba monasteries and aristocratic estates. The degree of connection of Tibetan populations with surrounding peoples through long-distance trade routes, as Giersch

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<sup>10</sup> It might be interesting though to estimate the population of these 'marginal' regions in relation to ethnic Tibet as a whole. They might well turn out to constitute a relatively high proportion.

<sup>11</sup> Dreyfus' articles, focusing on recent times, provide perhaps the strongest case for Tibetan national identity and unity (1994, 1995, 2002).

notes, is also significant, and it goes beyond the kind of trading links that Scott regards as characteristic of the relations between states and Zomian-type groups.

Schneiderman also raises the question of the 'orientalist' aspects of Zomian thought. She suggest that the deliberate blurring and erasing of national boundaries is likely to seem to indigenous Asian scholars like a reprise of old-fashioned colonialist ethnography. She notes that in relation to such scholars:

...advocates of Zomia must clarify that Zomia-thinking is not a return to previous models of cultural and ecological determinism, but rather an attempt simultaneously to acknowledge the role of states in shaping highland communities and to investigate indigenous forms of consciousness and agency within such processes (2010:299).

Shneiderman appears to be thinking here particularly of Nepalese scholars, although the point could be made more generally. Clearly, though, Shneiderman feels that 'Zomia-thinking' can be plausibly defended along these lines. In fact, she is one of those who feels that the Zomia model can usefully be applied to contemporary populations, including the subject of her own research, the Thangmi. These people divide their year between Nepal, India, and China, migrating on a regular basis between the Nepali hill districts of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, Sikkim and the Darjeeling district in India, and the border areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region in China. The Thangmi are 'Zomian' in that they systematically present themselves in different ways to exploit these various contexts. Shneiderman suggests that what is 'Zomian' in the contemporary situation is not so much escaping from states altogether, as trying to control the terms on which one is recognized by them:

Contemporary Thangmi encounter a range of 'recognizing agents', from territorial deities to the Nepali, Indian, and Chinese states, and from (international) non-governmental organizations and anthropologists to members of other ethnic groups, each of which reaffirm different aspects of Thangmi identity. I suggest that we might see the ability to control the terms of recognition that govern

such encounters, rather than emphasizing a lack of desire for such recognition, as an important feature of Zomia-thinking (Shneiderman 2010: 308).

Thus one can be "a 'non-state' people in subjective terms" (308) while also working for political recognition within a modern nation state.

The catch here perhaps is to define where the boundaries of Zomia-thinking might lie. We have already met Stringham and Miles' suggestion that multinationals might be seen as Zomian (Stringham and Miles 2012). To me that is definitely going too far, but I had already been thinking about more modest contemporary examples when I came across their article. Consider, for example, the large populations of families from South and Southeast Asia, West Asia, and North and Sub-Saharan Africa who now have members who have settled within the developed world. Such people, like many other migrants, often need to dissimulate to state authorities and other 'recognizing agents' about their precise ethnicity or the nature of their kinship ties, for reasons of migration or access to resources. Families may systematically build up a range of possible identities in Asia, Europe, North America, or Australia, and variously exploit local welfare provisions and other resources in the countries where they have settled. Are they exhibiting Zomian behaviour? It would be tempting to say that they are, and Scott himself might not be unsympathetic to such a usage, although it would seem to stretch 'Zomia' to a point where its explanatory value risks being lost. Yet where, along the continuum between, say, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Burmese highlands and the contemporary South Asian diaspora in the United Kingdom or Canada, does Zomia-thinking begin and end?

Patterson Giersch, the other contributor who deals directly with Tibet and the Himalayas in the *Journal of Global History* collection, writes on trade routes through Kham (Eastern Tibet – or Western Sichuan in Chinese terms). His critique of Scott centres on Scott's suggestion that the state, and state-like processes, did not effectively penetrate 'Zomia' until the late twentieth century. His brief historical conspectus suggests that:

Zomia included peoples who resisted states, plundered trade routes, and organized themselves in ways to enhance their autonomy. But people also adopted new practices out of a desire to participate in, not shun or hijack, networks of power and wealth... In Kham, the Qing and Tibetan states provided moderately safe trade routes, and those who benefited included local elites, such as the Khampa rulers of Chala or the monastic leaders in Litang. Even before the arrival of nation-states, it is therefore difficult to separate political power from economic or cultural transformations ... Zomia was not always a place in which culture or political organization was shaped by refusal (Giersch 2010: 237, 238).

Scott would not necessarily reject this point, but the extent to which people are buying into state resources is clearly an issue for any Zomian model, particularly in the contemporary situation.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above has suggested some of the reservations that might be posed in relation to Scott's model, particularly in relation to Tibetan regions, but neither Shneiderman nor Giersch suggest that we dismiss the relevance of his work on these grounds, and neither would I. My own feeling about Scott's work in relation to Tibet and the Himalayas is that his theoretical approach cannot provide a *total* mode of analysis in isolation from other explanatory frameworks. The Tibetan region over the last ten or twelve centuries was not simply an escape zone from the state. It witnessed significant, if ultimately limited, attempts at state formation in its own right before its eventual incorporation into the People's Republic of China. Yet Scott gives us an important new tool, which highlights and helps to explain aspects of Tibet and the Himalayas that conventional approaches deal with less satisfactorily.

Some of these are issues that I have been concerned about myself for many years. I argued for the relative weakness of Tibetan state formations as far back as 1982 (Samuel 1982=Samuel 2005:27-51, 1993), and in the first part of my 1993 book *Civilized Shamans*

(Samuel 1993) I tried to sketch an ongoing dialectic between stateless areas and the limited presence of state power, both internally and externally generated. A couple of years later, I suggested (Samuel 1994) that many characteristic features of Tibetan religion and culture might be understandable through comparison with the Southeast Asian highlands literature. Scott's work provides a wider, and significant, intellectual context within which to place these ideas.

We might nevertheless ask, what specific insights about Tibet might Scott's work suggest? I conclude with three general points.

(1) *Physical considerations.* While movement around the Tibetan plateau in pre-modern times was never easy, and many areas were relatively isolated, there were also major and important trade routes linking sizeable communities with elements of centralized power such as Lhasa, Shigatse, Chamdo, or Derge with the major states to Tibet's east, south and west. Scott's model tends to underplay long-distance trade. Long distance trade also has a long-term connection with Buddhism (Samuel 1994). However, an important consideration remained the cost of maintaining control over Tibet, and this doubtless explains why neither local Tibetan state formations nor the incursions of external state regimes tended to establish effective long-term relations of control or exploitation except in areas immediately adjoining areas of state power. This connects with a major theme of Scott's work. External powers might be able to establish control briefly, but they could not generally afford (until the 1950s) to maintain it.

(2) *The important contrast between peripheral and central regions*, or wild and tame, to cite terms I used in *Civilized Shamans* (Samuel 1993: 217-22, 571-2). I feel that this is still understated in many discussions of Tibetan societies, as indeed is the sheer range of Tibetan social formations and of environments within which they are located.

Scott's work directs our attention towards the elements of systematic rejection of centralized control present among both

pastoral groups (Pirie 2005a) and peripheral agricultural communities.<sup>12</sup>

Note though that Scott's Southeast Asian model is based on the valley-hill, *padi* rice-swidden cultivation contrast. Parallels elsewhere may have some of these features (e.g. the Hindu-Javanese hill people in East Java, cited by Scott; perhaps also such people as the Kogi in Venezuela, the Huichol in Mexico).<sup>13</sup> In the case of Tibet, what are the functional equivalents and what are their implications? Rather than swidden agriculture, the two mechanisms that stand out are pastoralism (the Goloks might be the prime example here) and sheer geographical remoteness and difficulty of access (as with the Sherpas of Nepal, or Gyalrong in Eastern Tibet). Do these mechanisms produce the same effects as that discussed by Scott?

There are Tibetan populations – the Sherpas would be a classic example – who have a mythology of escape from the state. In some cases (Bonpo, and non-Gelugpa traditions in general) there is an element also of escape from religious persecution. Here the *sbas yul* 'hidden valley' complex is particularly significant. This is a cultural pattern in which people are led to a remote region by a *gter ston* or visionary lama (e.g. Boord 2003; Childs 1999; Diemberger 1993, 1997; Dokhampa 2003; Lhundup 2001; Reinhard 1978; Sardar-Afkhami 1996; Shor 2011). While this escape is often phrased in religious terms, and the hidden valley described as a place to which

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<sup>12</sup> For pastoralists, see Pirie 2005a; for agriculturalists, Ramble 2007, and several of the articles in Centre for Bhutan Studies 2004. Also Pain and Deki 2000:206, on examples of flight from oppressive estate lords in Bhutan, and Goldstein's material on flight from oppressive estate lords in his articles on Central Tibet (e.g. Goldstein 1971).

<sup>13</sup> In his 2014 interview, Scott makes it clear that, as far as he is concerned, 'Zomias' are not restricted to the specific ecological contrast that underlies the Southeast Asian Zomia: "I think that the category of "regions of refuge" is rather capacious and that state-fleeing peoples are extremely common, and the geographies to which they flee are dependent upon what's available to them" (Gilman and Guilhot 2014:113). Thus the Netherlands might historically have been a Zomia of sorts, protected by the swamps and marshes of the river delta, which restricted the movement of cavalry (2014:113).

people flee as a refuge for religious practice, this is clearly not the only aspect. Central and Eastern Tibet underwent a long series of wars, especially in the eighteenth century, and a standard response of Tibetan populations was the flight to a *sbas yul* under the leadership of a charismatic lama.

The *sbas yul* as an exemplification of Scott's thesis is certainly tempting, but it has some limitations. While some *sbas yul* were perhaps primarily places of escape and refuge, either from exactions of state authorities or those of monasteries, *sbas yul* often had a political dimension as well which was not necessarily anti-state. Early *sbas yul* accounts suggest that these places were thought of in part as places where surviving members of the Tibetan imperial dynasty could take refuge.<sup>14</sup> In some cases at least (Sikkim and Yolmo are possibilities), the *sbas yul* ideology may have been little more than an ideological device to mask state expansion.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, Tibetans were often not looking so much to reject the state as to find a better local estate lord or ruler.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Note Childs' argument (1999) about the role of *sbas yul* in the early period as preserving members of the ruling lineage from the early Tibetan state. I don't think there is a necessary contradiction here, in that these lineages may have been seen less as exploitative aristocrats and more symbolic representatives of an idealized past when rulers were just and non-exploitative. However, as this suggests, kingship as such was not necessarily seen as illegitimate. Even Ramble's Te elects a quasi-king (Ramble 2007). It is perhaps worth noting that Buddhist kingship has an elective component as in the myth of the first king, Mahāsammata. In the Tibetan case there is a combination of the idea of the king as *chosen* with the idea of *hereditary transmission of ability* (*gdung rgyud* etc).

<sup>15</sup> David Templeman has suggested this for Yolmo in Nepal, personal communication 14 Sep 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Many of Scott's critics note that contemporary 'Zomians' are not necessarily averse to states as such. Thus Jonsson (2012: 165) notes that the ethnic minority people he has encountered in Southeast Asia "do not expect power to be moral, and have no categorical aversion to dealings with state agents", while Karlsson (2013: 329), discussing Northeast India, comments that people "hope for a state that can provide functional transport, education, health services, and justice. The controversy rather relates to whether one believes the Indian state, the far away center or Delhi, to be interested in or capable of delivering that."

(3) Finally, Scott's discussion of the *religious aspects of "Zomia"* is suggestive in relation to the Tibetan material. For Scott, core and periphery correspond to religious orthodoxy and heterodoxy. In the following passage, he is referring specifically to Theravāda Buddhism, though elsewhere he generalizes the point to other religious forms:

Centralized power helps explain a certain degree of religious orthodoxy at the core, but it doesn't fully account for the enormous religious diversity in the hills. The heterodoxy of the hills was itself a kind of state effect. Aside from being beyond the easy reach of the state, the hill populations were more scattered, diverse, and more often isolated. Where there was a Buddhist clergy, it was more dispersed and more decentralized, poorer, and, because it lacked royal patronage or supervision, more dependent on the favour of the local population. If that population was heterodox, as it often was, so too was its clergy. Schismatic sects were therefore quite likely to spring up in the hills. If and when they did, they were difficult to repress, being at the margins of state power (Scott 2009: 156).

Scott goes on to note that Buddhism itself "provided a strong warrant for withdrawal," citing the charisma afforded to hermits, wandering ascetics and forest monks. He also points out that heterodox groups were themselves among the peoples who were likely to flee to these marginal areas: "Hill demography and geography not only facilitated religious heterodoxy, they also served as a zone of refuge for persecuted sects in the valleys" (2009: 156).

In the Southeast Asian context, Scott sees these processes as underlying the opposition between religious forms that has often been described in terms of 'merit' and 'blessing'. The general idea here is that lowland peoples stress 'merit,' in other words positive karma. Merit implies morality, hierarchy and future lives, themes which link up with the ideological bases of Theravada Buddhist states. Upland peoples by contrast are more interested in blessing, which is shorthand here for rituals promoting this-worldly goals, such as health, fertility, and prosperity (Kirsch 1973; Durrenberger and Tannenbaum 1989; Kammerer and Tannenbaum 1996). If we look at the Tibetan plateau in these terms, it is surely significant that

followers of the dGe lugs pa tradition, most strongly associated historically with state formation, stress merit, while the rNying ma pa, most closely linked to the stateless pole, stress blessing, though we should be wary of oversimplifying here. Scott's model increases my own conviction that we need a polarity or continuum in describing Tibetan religion and Tibetan society.<sup>17</sup>

The link between heterodoxy – particularly of the charismatic and prophetic kind – and Zomian regions is, however, even more integral, in Scott's view, than the above implies. He suggests that the charismatic and prophetic role provides Zomian society with a form of leadership suited to its specific needs – citing the record of rebellions led by prophets (millenarian cults, in anthropological jargon) among the Hmong, Karen, and Lahu as examples (Scott 2009:282-293). Later in the same chapter he discusses heterodox Buddhism in Burma, arguing an affinity between the heterodox, charismatic aspects of Burmese Buddhism and the hill peoples (2009:299-302). Prophetic leadership and millenarian movements provide the "ultimate escape social structure" (2009:311-315). They give people the ability to 'turn on a dime,' as Scott puts it, to abandon their existing community and its social and religious practices, and create something radically new.

The obvious association in the Tibetan context is the role of the *gter ston* or 'visionary lama' (Samuel 1993), whom I have already mentioned in relation to the *sbas yul* or 'hidden valley'. There is no doubt that *gter ston* did add an element of visionary and prophetic leadership to Tibetan society throughout the centuries. I suspect that a Zomian analysis of their role would be a worthwhile undertaking, but, as in other areas of Tibetan society, this mode of analysis is unlikely to give an exhaustive account of their role.

Perhaps these three points are enough to illustrate both the relevance of Scott's work to Tibetan and Himalayan studies and some of its limitations. Overall, his mode of analysis shines a revealing new

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<sup>17</sup> Whether clerical and shamanic (Samuel 1993) are the best terms to define that continuum I am not sure, but I have yet to come across a better alternative.

light on many well-known features of Tibetan societies, and may help both Tibetans and foreign scholars perceive aspects of the Tibetan world that have not always received the attention they deserve. Scott's Zomians are more concerned with survival, with getting by, with managing in a difficult and threatening world, than they are with the pursuit of salvation through Buddhist or other religious practice. For them, the state in all its forms is a problem to be kept at bay, deceived and, where possible, evaded. They may help us to remember that Tibetans lived in the everyday world as well as in the transcendent universe of the Buddhist scriptures, that Tibetans too had to work hard at times to avoid the impositions and depredations of state authorities, and that Tibetan religion itself has incorporated much of those everyday needs within its complex technologies of the sacred.

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